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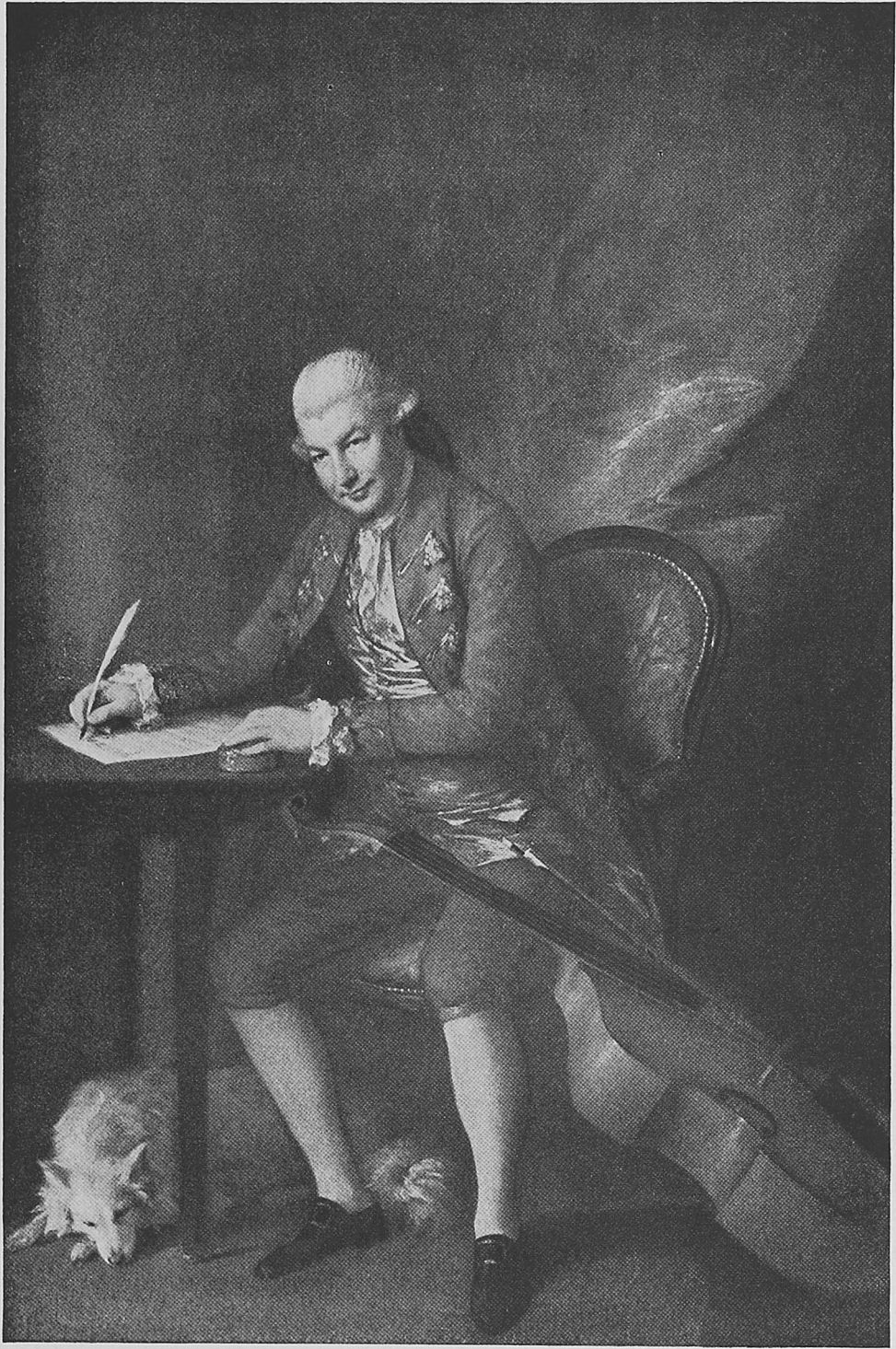
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PORTRAIT BY GAINSBOROUGH

In the collection of Mr. George J. Gould, New York

GAINSBOROUGH, THE MUSICIAN

GAINSBOROUGH'S place among the artists has long been settled. Reynolds spoke of him as the first landscape painter in Europe. "Well, Sir Joshua," interrupted Richard Wilson, "it is my opinion that he is also the greatest portrait painter in Europe." Their judgments were coloured by personal feeling, but the verdict of time is not going to lessen the force of their appreciation. Gainsborough is among the masters. There is little distinctively English in the quality of his art. When we attempt to discover how he acquired that ethereal lightness and grace we are nonplussed. His contemporaries were inclined towards the formal or the classic. Perhaps he borrowed Gallic refinement from Hubert Gravelot, one of his few teachers. But he was uninfluenced by the schools. Reynolds in his discourses cites Gainsborough as an example of an artist who arrived at great fame "without the assistance of an academical education, or any of those preparatory studies which have been so often recommended." Sir Joshua was not sure that this was wholly a matter for congratulation. Yet, if Gainsborough was self-taught, he did not neglect the fount of all inspiration. "Nature was his master, for he had no other," wrote his friend Thicknesse.

There is little material to help us in recreating the personality of Gainsborough. His temperament was essentially that of the artist. An old lady at Sudbury described him as "gay, very gay, and good looking." At the same time

he was modest, very shy, and much addicted to blushing. He admitted that he was "deeply read in petticoats." Had he not been an artist he would have made a talented musician. His genius was scarcely inherited, although his mother was an amateur painter. He came of a yeoman trading family in a tiny Suffolk town. They were all Dissenters, and, whatever virtues the Nonconformists possessed in the early eighteenth century, they can assuredly never be credited with any absorbing interest in the fine arts. The little country towns of England have seldom been centres of a very brilliant intellectual life. "God made the country, and man made the towns, but the Devil made the little country towns," cried Tennyson once in a moment of vexation. Yet Gainsborough was reared in such places as Sudbury and Ipswich.

His love of music has become one of the traditions of English art history. At Bath, the city of Humphry Clinker and the fashionable life of an intelligent society, he was able to indulge in this passion to the utmost. "Gainsborough's profession was painting, and music was his amusement, yet there were times when music seemed to be his employment and painting his diversion," said a musical acquaintance. Giardini, one of the most celebrated violinists of the time, was his intimate friend. The whole Gainsborough circle was musical. Sir Henry Bate-Dudley, the spirited editor of the *Morning Post*, was a performer on the violoncello; Fischer, the rather un-

happy son-in-law, "devoid of prudence and with no more intellect than his hautboy," could play the oboe angelically; Abel, the viol da gamba player, and John Christian Bach, youngest son of the immortal John Sebastian, were constant visitors to the studio. Gainsborough had a harpsichord sent down to Bath from Messrs. Broadwood's factory, and Giardini selected the instrument. Gainsborough sought for rich tone in his instruments, to be expected of a painter who was always seeking to extract colour from life. For colour and tone are almost synonymous. He borrowed Giardini's best violins, and quarrelled with Thicknesse over the possession of a fine viol da gamba. One of his friends gives an account of his passion for acquiring the instruments of eminent performers in the vain hope that he might produce from them tones equal to those of the original possessors. This same writer adds that, although Gainsborough had ear, taste, and genius, he never had application enough to learn his notes, an assertion unlikely in itself, and flatly contradicted by Rimbault, Angelo, and Sir Henry Bate-Dudley. There is a legend that Bach used to listen to Gainsborough's musical performances, and, after interrupting them with an occasional ironical "Bravo!" would at length push the painter from his seat at the harpsichord, upon which he would "flourish voluntaries as if inspired." Probably Gainsborough desired nothing better.

And, lastly, there is that delightful story recorded by J. T. Smith in his life

of Nollekens, the sculptor. Smith and Nollekens went to the studio and found the painter listening to a violin solo. Gainsborough held up his finger to silence the newcomers. The musician, a certain Colonel Hamilton, played on in such exquisite fashion that the artist promised him, if he would but continue, to give him "The Boy at the Stile," which the Colonel had often wished to purchase. For half an hour the violinist held the painter entranced and then departed in a coach, taking with him the canvas. "The Boy at the Stile" is still in the possession of a descendant of Colonel Hamilton. Surely no musician was better recompensed.

Music sweetened Gainsborough's busy life. When fatigued he turned to his fiddles and his harpsichord. "I'm sick of portraits," he wrote to a friend, "and wish very much to take my viol da gamba and walk off to some sweet village, where I can paint landskips and enjoy the fag-end of life in quietness and ease." He had many trials. His daughters wearied him with their tea parties and dances. "I hate a dust," he complained, "the kicking up of a dust and being confined in harness to follow the track while others ride in the waggon, under cover, stretching their legs in the straw at ease, and gazing at green trees and blue skies without half my *Taste*." But there were compensations. "My comfort is I have five viols da gamba, three Jayes and two Barak Normans." Jaye and Norman were the best musical instrument makers of the time.

From The Ladies' Field, London.